

What the interagency All Lands/All Hands agreement and action plan mean to the Refuge

by Doug Newbould

Last November, seven agencies with land management responsibilities on the Kenai Peninsula agreed to work together to implement the All Lands/All Hands Action Plan for Fire Prevention & Protection, Hazardous Fuel Reduction, Forest Health Restoration & Rehabilitation, and Community Assistance. The Kenai Peninsula Borough, the Alaska Division of Forestry (Kenai-Kodiak Area Office), the National Park Service (Kenai Fjords National Park), the U.S. Forest Service (Chugach National Forest), the Bureau of Land Management, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (Kenai National Wildlife Refuge) have collaboratively developed a comprehensive strategy to mitigate wildfire impacts and restore healthy forests on the Kenai Peninsula.

This action plan is the logical offspring of previous interagency planning efforts such as “An Action Plan for Rehabilitation in response to Alaska’s Spruce Bark Beetle Infestation” (Kenai Peninsula Spruce Bark Beetle Task Force, 1998) and individual agency project plans to reduce forest fuel hazards in and around the wildland-urban interface such as the Refuge’s Funny River Road hazard fuel reduction project (initiated in 1999).

While those former plans implemented fuels treatments on public lands, with a perspective of protecting communities from the outside—in, the guiding philosophy for the All Lands/All Hands plan is “from the back porch out”. This philosophy has its roots in the national Firewise Community Action Program, which is based upon an individual homeowner’s responsibility to make his/her home and property defensible from wildfire.

The Firewise Program also provides guidance for communities where the potential for wildfire exists. The goal of Firewise is to help communities mitigate the catastrophic impacts of wildfire through collaborative planning by individual homeowners or groups of homeowners, local governments and fire departments.

Firewise principles have been accepted by virtually every fire management agency and at-risk community in the United States and are now being incorporated

into community protection plans and land management plans everywhere. The National Fire Plan “NFP” (2001) and the Healthy Forests Restoration Act “HFRA” (2003) both provide federal direction and funding to federal land management agencies, in part for the implementation of Firewise activities. The four goals of the All Lands/All Hands Action Plan come directly from the NFP and the HFRA:

- Goal 1 – Fire Prevention & Protection
- Goal 2 – Hazardous Fuel Reduction
- Goal 3 – Forest Ecosystem Restoration
- Goal 4 – Community Assistance.

In keeping with the “from the back porch out” philosophy, the All Lands/All Hands plan seeks to accomplish the fourth goal first—by helping 20 Kenai Peninsula communities develop Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs) per HFRA direction. These CWPPs will identify defensible space and hazard fuel reduction needs in the wildland-urban interface (Goal 2), including more than 17,000 private land parcels with structures.

Other proposed firewise activities under Goal 2 in the All Lands/All Hands plan include infrastructure protection (fuel reduction along 641 miles of power line rights-of-way) and access/egress protection (fuel reduction along 222 miles of highways and roads). Existing land management agency plans to complete hazard fuel reduction projects within and outside of the wildland-urban interface would continue under the All Lands/All Hands plan. However, project prioritization and coordination would become an interagency task.

Goal 3—Forest Ecosystem Restoration—comes directly from the HFRA. To meet this goal, the plan proposes the restoration of forest cover on almost 200,000 acres of the Kenai Peninsula. The essence of Goal 1 (from the NFP and the HFRA) is to improve interagency capabilities to conduct wildland fire prevention and protection activities on the Peninsula.

The accomplishment of any one or all of the proposed activities in the All Lands/All Hands Action Plan will depend on three elements: community participa-

tion, interagency cooperation and adequate funding. Of these three elements, community participation and funding levels are unknowns. Interagency cooperation is already well-established through years of practice.

How this plan will affect the Refuge remains to be seen. Refuge fire management projects are funded through the National Fire Plan, not the HFRA. So those NFP projects will continue to be accomplished as NFP funding permits. As an interagency cooperator, the refuge will assist other agencies in the implementation of the All Lands/All Hands plan by providing equipment, tools, personnel and expertise whenever possible.

If I could propose another goal or desired outcome of this planning process—an outcome that would benefit the refuge and the fire-dependent ecosystems of

the Peninsula—it would be that every at-risk community on the Peninsula would become a Firewise community, so natural wildland fires could be managed for resource benefits and natural processes could be maintained in wilderness.

It's a lofty goal, I know, and some might say—a pipe dream. But if we, the interagency community and we, the citizens of the Kenai Peninsula all do our parts, then the All Lands/All Hands Action Plan can help us defend our lives, our homes and our businesses from the devastating effects of unwanted wildfires. And natural fires could be allowed to do what natural fires should do—maintain healthy ecosystems.

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